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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 001074

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SUBJECT: MODERATE RELIGIOUS LEADERS FIND THEIR VOICE

REF: LAHORE 95

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary: Bolstered by the government's new determination to combat terrorism, usually quiet moderate Pakistani religious leaders have begun publicly to condemn the Taliban. The most vocal are the Barelvi leaders who have formed a new alliance, the Sunni Ittehad Council, to counter the Taliban with their own moderate religious message. The vast majority of Pakistanis are Barelvi Sunnis, who support Sufi saints and the special status of the Prophet Muhammad, both theological issues that the Taliban oppose. In a landmark move, over 2000 Sunni religious leaders gathered in Islamabad on May 17 and released an unequivocal edict against suicide bombings and other Taliban atrocities. PM Gilani (himself a Sufi saint) called on moderate religious leaders to oppose the Taliban, but Ministry of Information has been leery about engaging religious leaders in its strategic communications initiative. Post, however, is planning exchange programs/outreach to the moderate Muslim community that represents the vast majority of Pakistanis. This cable should be read in tandem with Lahore 95. End summary.

12. (C) Except for some isolated instances of criticism, the silence of moderate Pakistani religious leaders to growing taliban attacks, even on mosques, has been remarkable over the past two years. This was due to three factors: (a) The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis are Barelvi Sunnis, who do not have a tradition of extensive political involvement (see reftel); (b) These religious leaders have been following the civil society/media inclination to ignore a terrorist threat that did not directly affect them or was attributable to "foreign hands;" and (c) Many leaders and rank and file were afraid of Taliban reprisals. According to the latest International Republican Institute poll, over 80 percent of Pakistanis supported the "peace deal" between the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) government and the TNSM that called for implementation of the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation, widely perceived as being Shari'a law, in Swat.

13. (C) Following militant attacks in the Punjab heartland (including incidents in Lahore and Mianwali), the video broadcast of the flogging of a woman in Swat and militant expansion into Malakand Division (Northwest Frontier Province), public attitudes began to change. On April 19, TNSM leader Sufi Mohammad made a public declaration to a large rally in Mingora, Swat that democracy and Islam were incompatible, the Pakistani courts "un-Islamic," and anyone who did not believe in the Taliban's version of Islam was a "kafir" (non-believer). These remarks outraged most

Pakistanis and galvanized religious leaders to respond.

Tableeghi Jamaat

¶4. (SBU) On April 27, the well-respected and largely apolitical leaders of Tableeghi Jamaat publicly denounced the enforcement of Shari'a at gunpoint. The Tableeghi Jamaat is a peaceful group that organizes Muslims of all sects in revivalist-style meetings to energize the faithful; it is well respected and has a large following in Pakistan. The declaration came from the highest Jamaat official, the 90-year old scholar, Maulana Abdul Wahab. The Jamaat asserted that any adherence to Shari'a that was forced at gunpoint was counter to the teachings of Islam and unacceptable. Wahab cited the example of Prophet Muhammad, saying that the Prophet never used force to spread the word of God. The announcement was made at the culmination of a three-day convention in Islamabad of tens of thousands of people. Following the announcement, several Jamaat leaders were threatened and kidnapped by the Taliban.

Invitation to the Imam of the Kaaba

¶5. (SBU) On April 26, the Federal Minister for Religious Affairs and a Barelvi religious leader, Syed Hamid Kazmi, said that the government had evidence suicide bombers were being trained in a madrassah in southern Punjab and stern action would be taken against those involved. On May 12, on the floor of the National Assembly, Kazmi called for

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extending military operations against Taliban to other parts of the country. The GOP has also planned to invite the Imam of the Kaaba in Mecca to Pakistan to deliver a message against extremism and terrorism. The Imam of the Kaaba delivered a well-received moderate message to overflow crowds at Islamabad's Faisal Mosque in 2007.

Sunni Tehreek

¶6. (C) On May 4, Sunni Tehreek (ST) staged a symbolically significant rally in front of the Peshawar Press Club condemning Talibanization. ST is the only militant wing of the Barelvis it was formed to respond to anti-Sunni extremist group Sipah-e-Sahaba's forced occupation of Barelvi mosques. Although it has been less militant since the death of much of its leadership in a 2005 bomb attack in Karachi, ST continues to lead weekly protests against the Taliban in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Recently, it has even vowed to stand and fight alongside the Pakistani military against the Taliban.

¶7. (C) In a meeting with Poloff, ST Punjab President Shadab Raza Qadri was clear that Barelvis supported Islamic laws, but did not agree with the Taliban's definition of Shari'a or Taliban plans to implement it. The ST condemned the Taliban's violence against innocent civilians and also against its religious ideology, which was counter to the Barelvi ideology held by the majority of Pakistani Sunni Muslims. The ST was concerned about the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other civilians that may be injured in the military operation. Qadri portrayed the ST as a religious organization and a political force, but he did not deny that ST was armed. However, he emphasized the ST was a defensive organization because the peaceful Barelvi community faced threats from extremist Deobandi and Taliban. The ST was concerned about the Taliban targeting Sufi and Barelvi leaders in Swat and Malakand who openly spoke out against the Taliban or offered safe havens to IDPs.

New Sunni Ittehad Council

¶8. (SBU) Jamaat Ahl-e-Sunnat is the largest social and religious organization of Barelvis in Pakistan. Its leadership has been very vocal in condemning the Taliban ideology and actions. The Jamaat joined together with seven other Barelvi groups, including ST, to form the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) on May 8. The SIC's express purpose is to wage a joint struggle against the growing Talibanization in the country. The alliance has demanded the Pakistan Army speed up its operation to eliminate the Taliban from the NWFP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and the group has appealed to the nation to unite against this growing menace. Addressing a press conference in Lahore on May 8, the SIC leaders announced a "Save Pakistan Movement" all over the country. The group was responding to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's May 7 call for religious leaders and scholars to stand up to the Taliban, and they planned to fully participate in the All Pakistan Ulema and Mashaikh Convention in Islamabad on May 17. The SIC leaders also announced that Sunni Muftis would soon issue fatwas (religious edicts) against the un-Islamic practices of the Taliban. The alliance is working with religious charities to provide relief supplies to IDPs in Swat.

All Pakistan Ulema and Mashaikh Convention

¶9. (C) On May 17, the leading Sunni religious leaders and scholars met in Islamabad to formally declare that suicide attacks and beheadings of people were "un-Islamic" prohibited acts, and the militants in Swat and FATA were pursuing the "agenda of Pakistan's enemies." The convention attracted over 2000 religious leaders and was organized by the Jamiat Ulema Pakistan (JUP), a leading Barelvi political party and erstwhile member of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). The edict issued at the end of the convention was the first time that prominent religious leaders from all over Pakistan had denounced the Taliban in such unequivocal terms. The nine-point resolution adopted by the convention rejected the Taliban's version of Shari'a, rejected suicide attacks and

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the beheading of people, fully supported the ongoing Pakistani military operation, demanded an end to the assassinations of clerics, and demanded that religious buildings and shrines be cleared of terrorists. The resolution also called for an end to pro-U.S. foreign policy and demanded provincial autonomy as per the 1973 constitution. The religious leaders expressed solidarity with the IDPs and called on the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) nations to extend aid to the 1.3 million people forced to flee their homes. The conference was full of impassioned speeches by religious leaders describing the atrocities of the Taliban and stressing that such actions were not permissible even if the Taliban declared that Shari'a was their goal. The JUP plans to hold a follow-on convention in Peshawar.

Religious Parties

¶10. (C) The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was formed as a bloc of six religious parties to strengthen its members in advance of the 2002 election, the alliance is mostly defunct now. Helped by the Inter-Services Intelligence, the MMA in 2002 won a considerable number of seats in parliament and led the NWFP provincial government from 2002-2008, until it was kicked out in the 2008 election for delivering neither Shari'a nor government services. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the most strident religious party whose official aim is to bring Shari'a law to Pakistan through constitutional means, boycotted the 2008 election. JI has been stridently opposed to military action in Swat, has been organizing "Go America Go" and anti-drone rallies across Pakistan, and strongly supported enforcement of the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation in Swat. However, JI leaders were suitably embarrassed by and rejected Sufi Mohammed's contention that democracy and Islam were

incompatible.

¶11. (C) The largest religious party is Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), a traditional Deobandi party that appeals to tribal Pashtuns in the NWFP. JUI-F is led by Fazlur Rehman, a politician who manages to negotiate his way into every government in Pakistan regardless of religious principles. Rehman has denounced both the peace deal with militants and the military action against militants in Swat to his own constituents, while remaining in the PPP government.

¶12. (C) Comment: The vocal response of moderate religious leaders against the Swat taliban was widely welcomed by a public that has been alienated by the GOP and Pakistani military support since former President Zia-ul-Haq's time of Deobandi and other more extreme religious ideologies. Aware of the Zia legacy, the Information Ministry (led by avowedly secular PPP government officials) remains wary of engaging moderate religious leaders in its new strategic communications initiative. The Mission, however, believes we should reach out to these moderate voices--which represent the overwhelming majority in Pakistan--and is planning several exchange and outreach initiatives to this audience.
End comment.
PATTERSON